Do-Over CYOA

In more ways than one, even.

Premise

First off, it's dark.
Second, it's fucking cold.
Third, you're lying down, and you kinda feel like puking.
That was right. There was that party, then *that* happened, then you had to leave before everyone beat you up, and then you had to drown your sorrows something fierce. As you slowly come to your senses again, it gets clear to you that you evidently decided to lie down and take a nap on a bench in the city center – it's a wonder that you haven't gotten mugged yet, really. It must be about 4 in the morning, and you're still pretty drunk from how you're feeling – not stupidly so, but you don't want to drive. Shit, and just as you wanted to get home before dawn.
Someone sits down beside you with a nonchalance that kinda creeps you out, just sinking onto the bench without a word. Drunkenly rising up to see who the hell it is, you feel a man's hand pressing lightly down on your head.
"Aye, you don't need to do that. You wanna listen to me now. Don't get too curious, or you'll waste a big chance, mate."
The voice is a man's – he's perhaps in his twenties or thirties, with a hair-raisingly thick urban London accent. You hear him lighting a cigarette and exhaling in relief after the first drag.
"Fact of the matter is, I've come here to make you a big offer. A really bloody big one, to be honest. If you wanna listen to it, listen proper. I can't answer any questions unless I say so, and if you get too nosy, I'll have to leave. You in on it?"
The man evidently takes your silence as an affirmative, and takes another deep drag of his cigarette before speaking.
"Look, it's a long story. Convoluted as all bloody hell, too. I'd just end up sounding completely daft if I was to explain any of it beyond what I have to – yes, even crazier than I'm gonna sound right now. There's a lot of people and things involved, like. It spans quite a bit, too – actually, if I was you, I'd thank my grandfather. Without those few things he did, this would never have happened. Butterfly effect, like. But enough of that."
The man lights another cigarette – this time, you notice that there's no telltale click of a lighter, just a muted flare of fire and the crackling sound of burning tobacco.
"Don't laugh, innit? Just to be safe, don't scream, cry or anything else, really. Because of circumstances, like, I've been told I should give you a new chance, yeah? That means all of it, really – I'd reckon you can fix everything you're not satisfied with. I've let a little bird tell me you always wanted it. Before you want an explanation, it's like this: fuckin' butterfly effect, mate. Someone did something ages ago, and it escalated."
The man pauses for just long enough to be a tiny bit awkward.
"Bloody long time, really. Fuck, how it's been a bloody long time. Never mind that, mate. I'm just Recruitment – you sign here on this dotted line, and I move you on to the others. Gotta do it that way, really – the way things are, we can't hand these gifts away like candy. We did it once, ways back, and look what a name it gave us. But enough of that. This time, we're trying to cut down on the strings attached,

though it's been a bloody mess is what it has. It's a PR campaign, like. Since that bloody Jerry menace decided to write a play on it, we've been fucked."
Your eyes open blearily for a moment from a slight fit of drunken twitching, and you *think* you see a bit of the man – tall, neatly dressed, short black hair, a little bit of beard and a necklace you vaguely recognize as the alchemical sign for Venus.
"Now don't you overthink it, mate. It's now or never."

Identity

It's been a long trip – you think you fell asleep for a few hours along the way, and your hangover is long gone. The back seat of the guy's navy-blue Lexus was just too goddamn comfortable for someone who's been sleeping a bender off on a bench not an hour ago. It's not the kind of car you'd figure belongs to a rapist or kidnapper of some sort – it's Saskatchewan-licensed and looks like it's straight out of the car dealer's. You do get a good look at the guy during the drive, however – he's probably in his thirties, pretty good-looking but stuck in the 70's when it comes to fashion. He's green-eyed and with short black hair swept back in a hairdo that's probably been ripped straight from Orlando Bloom anno 2005, with a nascent five-o'-clock shadow surrounding his soul patch. He wears a black jacket and burgundy shirt with no T-shirt, allowing his Venus necklace to dangle down onto a patch of bare chest. While driving, he wears a pair of red-tinted sunglasses – he does drive with the high beams on all the time – and sucks down B&H Blacks like they were breathable air, chasing each one with a spritz of wintergreen breath spray. He's surprisingly surly once he's past his initial sales speech – he occasionally mutters to himself and swears out into thin air, and the most eloquent reply you've managed to get out of him has been "fuck off, I'm driving".
By the time you wake up from an unexpected nap, the sun has risen, peeking over the canopies of a sea of pine trees. The road underneath you is bumpy and uneven, but that doesn't prevent the guy from doing 50 an hour anyway. You don't recognize the scenery outside – you must have gone pretty far in the time you were crashed out. The man seems to have just finished a phone call, wedging the phone back in the holder and grabbing the wheel properly again. After lighting another cigarette (there must be at least two more packs in the mountain of empties on the dashboard by now), he reaches onto the passenger seat and pulls out a sheaf of papers dotted with coffee stains.
"Excuse me very much for the silence, like, but I don't get paid extra for nights, and that doesn't put me in a good mood. I'm just Recruitment, as I said, and my job with you is pretty much over by now."
It seems like he was affecting an accent before, even if it was rather convincing – he still sounds British, but with a bog-standard Home Counties accent that's almost aggravatingly hard to place. His voice has dropped a bit too, though that might just be the two packs of cigarettes.
"Look, I'll get this over with and get on to the next one – we're goddamn busy at the time. We can let you start over partially, kinda – I don't advise you to look too deeply into it, but the mechanisms are esoteric, or should I say apocryphal. We can't just do you up to your specifications, but I like to think we have quite a good selection of possible, uh, identities. I can assure you that no one will be missing them, so to say. If you're gonna chicken out, you can still tell me to pull over and everything will be over too."
He lights another cigarette (when did he even finish the previous one?) and stares down at the wheel for a while before getting his eyes back on the road, staring very firmly at the midline. This still doesn't keep him from driving straight down it.
"Just a tip from me to you, got? It might seem easy to just go doing whatever you want, but don't go too far. We're not creating anything, I think I should say. We can't really *do* that very well, and if you're well-read

you probably know. Studied Spanish or Russian, you should already know most of what's going on. We're more, how you say, *borrowing*, and you have to be careful not to make people suspect anything's wrong. *Very* careful, like."
He underscores the last sentence by grabbing the cigarette lighter out of the dashboard and mashing it violently into the ashtray, sending a plume of noxious tobacco-celluloid smoke swirling around the ceiling of the car. It hits you that he hasn't been using the lighter before at all.
"We're gonna give you a signing bonus or two, 'cause we're going to be inconvenienced if you fuck up, and seeing as we're trying to make a good impression, we're compensating. Send you past Amir for some goodies, maybe even past the Man with the Green Tie if you wanna gamble."
He shivers visibly when mentioning the latter name, pronouncing it in a way that leaves no doubt that it's capitalized. He's interrupted, however, when his eyes settle on something in the distance – a gas station on the edge of the road, with a blocky motel building towering just behind it. Slowing down, he pulls carefully up to it, looking out both side windows as he does so. He presses a button on the dashboard, and the rear left door clicks open.
"Well, guess that's it. You still have a bit of time in the lobby to read the files. By the way, forgot to tell you – my name's Louis."
The man – Louis – frowns a bit, though it's impossible to tell exactly what nuance it's conveying through the shades, and drives off at a dangerous speed, left back door still open.

Subject List: Project AHR
Phrased for ease of understanding by clients.

"Welcome to Project AHR – the result of untold years of work and ambition. Through this project, we plan to effectivize our services nearly tenfold, becoming able to offer high-standard services to clients all around the world, as well as alleviating the pressure placed on us by our business rivals. We hope that you will support us in this sensitive development stage, allowing us to kickstart an unrivaled service never before seen on the free market. Checking any of the following boxes is considered to be an agreement to the Non-Disclosure Agreement and Terms of Use on Page 10.
All you have to do, dear Client, is to select one of the blueprints offered below. There might be extenuating and/or ameliorating circumstances applying to the blueprint, and any issues relating to this are the responsibility of you, the Client. Due to complex legal and ethical circumstances, we can only offer the blueprints as-is, and no alterations are possible nor allowed at this stage. If you qualify for extra benefits as dictated by the Project, further alterations will be possible immediately after the application of the blueprint. We guarantee that there will be no form of unwanted mental alteration in excess of the explicitly mentioned points taking place as a result of the blueprint being applied, though intentional effort and/or direct requests void this guarantee."
A sheaf of Post-It notes has been stuck to the second page, covered in a dense and pointy handwriting you can easily imagine is Louis'. It looks like he ended up dragging on and just pasted each note onto the end of the other.

Cliff's Notes: No memory loss unless you actively try, but moderate personality intrusion (most import. outlined). People will know you and notice if you act strange, but you'll know everything the blueprint does and get into it in a few days. You retain everything you know, but the blueprint's body supersedes your old potential and takes a bit of practice.

- Oliver Remy, Canadian Yuppie
  Male, 23 years old, Canadian citizen, blond, blue-eyed
  Oliver Remy is the heir to a Canadian old-money family sunk to their armpits in debt. He's been pushed mercilessly to succeed from the day he was born, but has had no actual goal except "being the best at everything". He's short-haired, but with just enough hair to style, and has a yuppie sense of dress that's actually not that bad in action.
  + Good-looking and rich
  + Large base of knowledge regarding politics, finance and fine culture – and he speaks perfect French
  + In the middle of a Dartmouth College finance doctoral education, and doing pretty well – and he's juggling a prominent frat at the same time
  +/- Gay
  - Neurotic mess with many psychosomatic symptoms such as sweating and nausea in stressed situations
  - Family is not only ambitious, but also greedy, amoral and leeching
  - Cocaine addict with a steady hookup
- Hunter Steele, Gun Nut
  Male, 25 years old, US citizen, brown-haired, brown-eyed
  Hunter Steele (it isn't his real name) is a mountain of a man, with arms like tree trunks, a barrel chest and a look in his eyes that could strike a man dead at ten paces. He has a buzz cut and a layer of stubble that you could sharpen knives on, and dresses like a typical off-duty Marine.
  + Abs like corrugated iron and biceps like steel ingots
  + Weapons geek and proud /k/ommando, with seven automatic rifles and a huge stack of second-hand military equipment at home
  + Macho charm like you wouldn't believe, at least with the women who like the silent and scowling types
  +/- House is a deathtrap rigged with all kinds of explosives and alarms – no one enters safely, and that counts for everyone but him
  - Not actually a Marine, but a graduated shooter nerd who was dishonorably discharged for irresponsible use of service weapons
  - Felony sentence for assault and battery – all his weapons are illegal for him to keep, and he falsely reported his stock at that
  - At heart, a poseur with a vulnerable ego and a short temper
- Stephanie Murray, Vaguely Employed
  Female, 20 years old, UK citizen, red-haired, green-eyed
  Stephanie Murray is a typical example of what poetic types would call an "unpolished beauty" – she's a little harried-looking and doesn't wear makeup, and her clothes are never ironed and always too big, but it seems to fit her. She usually hangs around one party or the other, and at any other moment is usually at home in her council flat, often smoking a cigarette on the balcony.
  + Good-looking and knows how to use it
  + Good head on her shoulders – quick-witted and fast on her feet, and pretty bright at that
  + Holds her liquor (and a lot of other drugs) like a champ, and is a godsend at any party
  +/- She has a ton of friends, but all of them are chavs

- College dropout, and at a pretty critical time at that
- Functional drug addict – no one drug in particular, just so used to not being sober that her body and mind freak out when she's sober for longer than a day
- Occasionally unpleasant, with a tendency to use her looks and gender as a blunt tool – hasn't paid for weed in a year, and people remember it

- Eric Rainier, Career Sleaze
  Male, 18 years old, US citizen, brown-haired, blue-eyed
  Eric Rainier is a skinny, hatchet-faced kid in a green hoodie and oversized cargo pants, with greasy brown hair, chipped teeth and a perpetual cigarette in his mouth. He's technically on psychological welfare (nothing serious, just malingering and cheating his way to an Adderall script), but gets money from his parents as well and sells drugs to people on his high school campus on the side.
  + Economically independent, lives alone and takes care of his own chores – and has enough on his account to be future-proofed for months
  + Basically infinite supply of drugs of any kind, provided the supplier sees some money down the line
  + Not book-smart by any stretch, but with a razor-sharp eye for business and an incredible sense for impending trouble that borders on the uncanny
  +/- Career drug dealer – lots of friends, lots of enemies
  - Charming as a block of Rockwool – socially clumsy and doesn't know it, laughs at inopportune moments and is nicknamed "Nosferatu" by his friends for a reason
  - Reputation as a date rapist – it's not actually true, but he *has* tried
  - Firmly underage
- Yasuda Nina, Actual Japanese Idol
  Female, 22 years old, Japanese citizen, black-haired, brown-eyed
  Yasuda Nina is a rather atypical candidate for the project. She's a reasonably popular member of a certain Japanese "idols you can meet" group, playing the role of the tomboy character. This actually isn't faked at all – she's about as tomboyish as they come, with short, tufty sun-bleached hair, a slight suntan, a taste in clothing that boils down to "T-shirts, checkered flannel shirts and jeans" and just enough abs that it counts.
  + An actual idol, whose job is to be charming and personable – she's good at it, and every ounce is genuine
  + Pretty buff for a Japanese woman her age, and very athletic too – mostly dancing, but she's a natural talent at athletics in general
  + Stubborn and motivated like you wouldn't believe, and never backs down from a problem she wants to solve no matter what's in the way
  +/- Not just "business lesbian", but gayer than all of the Copenhagen Pride Parade – and it's a fine line to walk in the industry
  - Sometimes stupidly daring and impulsive, with a nearly nonexistent sense of caution
  - Being an idol is actually an insanely hard job, with a tight schedule, constant fan attention and requiring a lot of social surplus
  - Drinks like a sponge at private parties and thinks the tabloids won't notice – but they will
- Benjamin Garfunkel, Private Eye
  Male, 43 years old, US citizen, black-haired, blue-eyed

Benjamin Garfunkel is the spitting image of the cop-drama private eye – thinning hair, sharp features and a tendency towards trench coats. He even has the stereotypical problems on the home front – he's divorced with two kids who come to meet him far too rarely for his taste. He's tall and skinny, but still quite wiry and has kept well for his age.

+ Certified private investigator, with license and paperwork – ex-cop too, and he even resigned of his own free will

+ Intelligent, cautious and sharp-eyed

+ Brilliant when it comes to the law, with a good gut feeling and an intimate familiarity with the system

+/- Jewish by birth if not by belief; family is helpful and supportive, but insists on him remarrying and stages huge get-togethers every major Jewish holiday. His Tanta Feygele also makes enough latkes to feed an army, and won't stop nagging until they're all eaten.

- Getting up in years – you have 40 years at best

- Not exactly an alcoholic, but compulsively drinks himself senseless whenever something bad happens in his life

- Ex-wife is an absolute nightmare, and the worst thing is that her insults and accusations are mostly true

- Samantha Harper, Cosplayer

  Female, 23 years old, US citizen, blonde, blue-eyed

  Samantha Harper is the kind of person who's a mainstay at any con – the cosplayer whose costume is only eclipsed by her tits. She's deeply involved with the fan culture and has an ungodly number of friends, as well as a frantic social life.

  + Would you look at that face, and would you please then look down. No, seriously, sweet Christ most people would kill to be her.

  + Everyone's friend in the cosplay community, and very skilled at the technical aspects as well as the background material

  + Speaks Japanese, with only a bit of an American accent

  +/- Very much the weeaboo – interested in everything Japanese and very diligent about researching it

  - Kind of histrionic, and gets surly and sour if people aren't paying attention to her. The center of a lot of drama in her friend group, and looks ever so slightly down on her friends.

  - Considers herself a "geek girl", and pretends to be a fan of a lot of things she has neither the initiative nor the attention span to actually learn about

  - Those looks take maintenance, and they invite a lot of clingy attention

- Erica Underwood, Young Girl

  Female, 9 years old, US citizen, brown-haired, brown-eyed

  Erica Underwood is the kind of girl who blends into a grade school yearbook until you look it through for the third time. She's a bit chubby, but not enough to stand out, and she's of pretty average height. She doesn't have the allowance to buy her own clothes, and her mother can get carried away, so her clothes are always-changing.

  + You've got an entire human lifetime in front of you, plus a ton of potential to grow up to be what you want

  + Impressively talented at art and music, and is pretty much guaranteed to be able to go

professional at some point
+ Too young to be properly prosecuted or imprisoned; benefits from Missing White Girl Syndrome if anything should ever happen to her
+/- Stuck with parents for the next nine years; they're nice but overly eager, and will get paranoid when friends start drinking. They do pay all the bills, cook, clean, drive her around and in general go out of their way to take care of their daughter, though.
- Hasn't gone through puberty yet, which means a lot of unpleasant experiences lie in wait
- Definitely not all that pretty and will never be – "homely" is a slightly nice way of saying it
- Resoundingly underage, with no qualifications and very little knowledge that can be useful to you; legal minor with little right to choose on her own

- Moritz Farber, Baron of Porn
  Male, 33 years old, German/Danish dual citizenship, brown-haired, grey-eyed
  Moritz Farber, in personality, occupation and looks, is a 50/50 mix of porn instructor and businessman. He's a slightly tubby man in his thirties with short, curly brown hair, a frizzy five-inch goatee and a wide, avuncular face. He almost always wears a grey business suit and orange-tinted glasses, and he has a habit of stuffing the end of his hideous ties into his jacket pocket.
  + CEO and founder of the waggishly named "Fornix Nature Films", a lucrative porn studio putting out at least 20 relatively high-quality videos a year. The company does a bit of everything, from stuff you could air just after the watershed targeted at horny 14-year-olds to a seriously dense straight-to-DVD series by the name of "Fetishes You Never Knew About".
  + Cheery, open and charismatic, with no trace of social anxiety; could lie the IV out of a dying man and sell sand in the Sahara
  + Aspiring politician of the slightly more offbeat kind in his native Flensburg, and a surprisingly engaged community member with a fair amount of friends. As a side note, growing up halfway in Flensburg and halfway in Padborg makes him trilingual in German, Danish and English.
  +/- Porn is hard work – while an advantage of having people on your payroll who have sex for money is a free lay with a pro whenever you want it, the dreary routine, occasionally depressing histories of the stars and the heavy workload is enough to turn someone off porn entirely
  - Too nice for his own good; his tendency to buy everyone drinks is damn near pathological, and he can't refuse someone who's done him a good turn
  - Crackdowns on explicit and sexist material in Germany have started to threaten his position, and a few of his snappy comments regarding female politicians have made the news
  - Bad junk-food habit – eats like shit and pretty much has to in order to keep doing his job. Particularly favors ice cream.
- Kanematsu Mitsuyoshi, Actual Yakuza Member
  Male, 29 years old, Japanese citizenship, black-haired (but bleached), brown-eyed
  Some people have to keep the traditions alive, and Kanematsu Mitsuyoshi is one of them. He's tall for a Japanese man, with bleached, styled hair, shaven eyebrows, at least five earrings and a lip that's been split at least five times. He's not burly per se, but he's pretty big and still rather agile, with muscular arms covered in tattoos. He wears elaborately embroidered windbreakers featuring the crest of the Inagawa-kai, as well as tracksuit pants and combat boots.
  + Has a well-paying job that he's good at, with connections that let him buy guns and drugs like candy

+ Strong, fast and most importantly mean – fights dirty and does it well
+ Streetwise like you wouldn't believe – while he's of average intelligence, he's basically a walking encyclopedia of where to buy illegal goods, what gangs control what areas and how to foil police. Also experienced enough with foreign criminals to speak Chinese, Russian and Turkish in a criminal context.
+/- Scary because he's ugly – shaven eyebrows, boxer's nose, fucked-up lips and teeth, solarium tan and irezumi tattoos don't make you pretty, but they sure make you intimidating
- Chain-smoker to the degree where it chews up a lot of his budget and severely fucks with his head if he doesn't get a cigarette – doesn't have any lifestyle illnesses yet, but will if he keeps on smoking
- Zainichi Korean – maligned by nationalists and right-wingers in both Korea and Japan, and never really at home in either
- Yakuza work has strings attached (say goodbye to half of the hot springs and bathhouses in Japan), and not following orders is likely to get people maimed or even killed

- Mary S. Washington, Civil Rights Lawyer
  Female, 29 years old, US citizenship, black-haired, brown-eyed
  Mary Washington is all business – a short but wiry black woman with a ruler-straight posture, a look in her eyes that could strip the paint off a car and straightened black hair pulled back in a bun so tight that it's practically a facelift. She wears suits to every occasion – open green blazer jackets and matching pleated skirt if it's informal, black suit jacket and matching pencil skirt with black high heels if it's formal.
  + Practicing lawyer and good at it – usually wins most cases as long as they're not outrageously rigged or the defendant is as guilty as a cat with a cream mustache, and even then manages to win a lot of them
  + Knows no fear – she's not exactly a fighter (though she does have a brown belt in aikido), but can stare down men almost twice her size
  + Brains and beauty all in one – if she has to, every suit button she loosens increases her chance of winning a case by 5%
  +/- Respected back in the neighborhood and is a powerful rallying symbol for racial solidarity. On one hand, this makes it hard for anyone to slander her and makes sure that two or three housing complexes are unquestioningly on her side – on the other hand, she's expected to defend her friends and family no matter what they've done to who, and her high income means that she's the one who pays for Friday-night barbecues back in the complex.
  - Stubborn to the point where it's a personality flaw – becomes insulted at the very thought of backing down, and will keep up an impossible struggle solely to say she went through with it
  - Inhumanly hard on herself and almost as hard on other people – well-meaning, but with chronic stress ulcers and doesn't make friends easily
  - Social inheritance is definitely an obstacle – her family is the least nice towards her in the complex and regularly mooches off her, there are old pictures of her in baggy pants, a Karl Kani hoodie and with a 40 of St. Ives in her hand on the Internet, and the S. in her middle name stands for Shaniqua (and her family would be mortally insulted if she was to change it).
- Katherine "Cat" Sellers, Emo Kid
  Female, 15 years old, UK citizen, black-haired (actually blonde), blue-eyed
  Katherine Sellers is a straight-up remnant of 2009 – she's skinny in a pale and bony way, with dyed

black hair, dead-raccoon makeup and a penchant for pseudo-occult necklaces. She owns a seemingly endless assortment of black leather jackets with a few superfluous zippers, tight grey jeans and emo-band T-shirts, topping it off with either a pair of clunky combat boots or a pair of clapped-out high-top Converse sneakers.

+ Her life is pedestrian in the good way – she has no job to tend to, no real enemies and no real problems in her daily life

+ While she's of course unpopular among the "cool kids" (of her own conscious decision), she has a solid circle of similarly stuck-in-2009 friends who lament the decline of emo music together after school every day. They're not exactly competent, but they're good friends and almost always up for fun.

+ Actually artistic and not just playing at it – plays guitar in a band by the name of First Time She Died, and discounting the terrible name and embarrassing lyrics, they're actually pretty damn good for a bunch of teenagers. She's pretty poetic too, and her poetry is reminiscent of Baudelaire in a good way. She's not bad-looking, either.

+/- Smack in the middle of puberty – while this means you've got a lot of years ahead of you and quite some potential for change, it also means that her everyday life is a morass of teenage drama and petty run-ins with the law.

- Impulsive and pettily moody – everyone who's had their own teenage years will know what it's like

- A tendency towards risk-seeking behavior motivated by a pervasive sense of cul-de-sac martyrdom over her suburban family – drinks more than a 15-year-old should and is quickly getting hooked on cigarettes, not to mention the chaos her friends' house parties tend to end up in

- Just a teenager in the end – anyone seeking a blueprint with a clear set of talents and a finished education, not to mention freedom from a well-meaning but overly worried family, should really look elsewhere

Tools

It's pretty obvious from the first glance that the gas station isn't exactly being used for its original purpose anymore. The entire lot is festooned with signs proclaiming the station closed, and the windows are boarded over from the inside, but three cars are parked by the self-service area and the light over the sliding door is still blinking softly. The lot is nearly being overtaken by nature, and the grass along the driveway is a waist-height sea of weeds and thistles among stiff, bristly straw, but the path to the front door is entirely clear.

The sliding door glides open when you approach it, its tracks obviously freshly greased. The room beyond is obviously a renovated gas station shop, with the same tiled floors and noncommittally beige walls, but the shelves and coolers have been stripped and replaced by a low table and two chairs in a rough approximation of a waiting room. A half-empty bowl of candy sits on the table, more of a gesture than a practical snack, flanked by a single ballpoint pen. Sitting down in one of the chairs – comfortable, but with one lopsided leg – you start considering the blueprints in the documents you've received. They don't seem official in any way save for the oily half-legalese they're written in, but you wouldn't have followed Louis if you didn't have some kind of hope in whoever he's working for.

You've just finished making your choice when a surly-looking young woman with inch-long grown-out roots and an Adidas tracksuit opens the door to the former day manager's office, narrowing her eyes at you like

you're some kind of particularly overgrown insect.
"Why am I not surprised? Come on, buddy, it's in here. Amir's waiting for you."
Her accent is quite like the one Louis was faking in the beginning, but less indistinct – hers sounds like some offshoot of urban London English allowed to ferment for a generation in some God-forsaken northern suburb. She turns on her heel, slamming the door after herself in a single movement.
When you enter the manager's office, your first impression is total sensory confusion. A heavy, smoky fragrance fills the hazy air, at least two different kinds of tinkling music are playing and the surroundings are so garish that your senses immediately give up on parsing them. When you manage to focus, you see that the office has been converted into some sort of pseudo-Victorian curiosity store that might only ever have existed in fiction – all sorts of amulets, robes, censers, scrolls, bottles, vials and decorative weapons crowd the carved mahogany shelves, and the air is thick with smoke. It smells like incense, cannabis and something flowery you can't exactly put your finger on. A lanky, dark-skinned man is hunched over the desk in the center of the room – still just an ordinary Esso-issue desk, bolted fast to the floor at that – poring over something that looks like an ornate set of scales, which are seemingly irregularly twitching on their own. He's not much older than Louis and probably a good five years younger – definitely Middle Eastern, with small, round horn-rimmed glasses, a thin but dense mustache and a head of short, wire-brush-stiff hair. He wears a moss-green djellaba with a bit of sparing Arabic embroidery around the collar and the sleeves, and occasionally takes a puff off a small metal pipe in his hand. It takes about ten seconds before he notices you, at which point he nearly jumps out of his seat, his pipe falling onto the table and sending a shower of ashes cascading dangerously close to a stack of papers.
"Excuse me, excuse me. I was a bit busy with work."
Arabic as his attire might be, his English is posh enough to fit at the Queen's dinners, and with only a slight Arabic lilt to it. He hurriedly sweeps up the ashes, seemingly trying to do four things at once – cleaning up, looking at a sheaf of papers on his desk, adjusting the pair of scales and looking up at you to nod reassuringly. The girl from before simply stands in the corner, smoking a cigarette with the filter torn off and looking exasperated.
"All right, all right. Everything should be in order now. Tea, coffee?"
Without even waiting for an answer, he reaches onto the shelf behind him and grabs two unspeakably kitschy porcelain cups, the kind that British housewives would have considered "Oriental" in the Edwardian era. He picks four pieces of cane sugar out of an ornate brass sugar bowl with a pair of matching tongs, dropping one into one cup and three into the other before pouring pitch-black tea onto them from a baroque samovar in the corner. Shunting the cup with the single cube of sugar in front of you, he starts speaking again.
"I'm always inconvenienced with how to act in these situations, so excuse me if I seem evasive. I'm prior to not many more secrets than you are, you see. My job here is to issue supplies to those who have clearance, and to explain to them how these supplies work. I've only been here for two years, so I'm still a newcomer, and I sadly can't answer that many questions."
He holds an uncannily brief pause to gulp down his tea in a single mouthful – it must be half sugar by now. A quick sniff of the air above your cup is enough to tell you that this stuff is not for you, or indeed for anyone but Amir – it seems like there's orange peel, rose petals, anise, cloves, cinnamon and untold other spices in it, and it's blacker than a moonless night.
"In short, I've been told to give you five, er, "coupons" to acquire supplies with. These aren't physical, so simply please bear with Management – I'll tell you how much something is worth. I can't answer you on

how they work, why they work, who made them, how old they are or really anything else than what they do and how to use them. If I knew, I still wouldn't be allowed to tell you. Well, choose as you will – everything here that can't be used to make tea is allotted for requisition."

- Amir's Old Pipe
  Coupons: 1
  This plain wood-and-metal pipe is made to smoke cannabis, and has definitely seen its fair share of everything herbal that can be smoked – it's stained and greasy, and the smell alone is enough to make it any drug dog's field day. If it's lit without anything in it, anyone who smokes it will feel the effects of smoking weak but pleasant hashish – it might take half an hour of smoking to really get high, and it's not really viable for groups, but it's convenient nonetheless and never gets unpleasant to smoke. If a small nugget of cannabis or opium is put into the pipe, the pipe will never run dry until two hours have passed, no matter how much has been smoked.
- Tinted Shades
  Coupons: 1
  You recall seeing something Louis wearing something very similar to these red-tinted driving shades, though his had a bit of tape around one lens. These glasses will filter all of your senses according to your own expectations, desires and of course bias – if you're pissed at a co-worker, he might appear as a horrible, slimy sleaze through the shades, and if you've just binged on cyberpunk novels, everything might appear a bit darker, grittier and more cluttered with technology. The glasses even double as an actual pair of beer goggles – if you want to get laid but have to settle for the bottom of the barrel, the glasses will make a 20-dollar meth-head hooker look and feel like a Bond babe. The world will look just a bit more like you want it, and the people in it likewise. While you can roughly choose what you want to see (since it *is* defined by what you want, after all), the effect will never make things up out of whole cloth or change anything but your perceptions – it changes the way you see existing things, but they'll still be the same type of thing. For example, you might see the trashy charver behind the counter as a supermodel in high fashions, but you won't mistake a mannequin or a small tree for the same. The glasses might make the 99-cent hotdog you bought on a bender taste good, but it won't save you from the inevitable Chicago 2 AM Revenge; they will make the people you disagree with look like frothing lunatics with laughable opinions to you, but people aren't less likely to believe them; and they might make Duke Nukem Forever feel like the game it was supposed to be, but in reality it's still the disappointment of the ages. The glasses can also mislead you about what you're seeing, as you have no instinctual awareness of what's been edited by the glasses and what hasn't – you need to take them off to sense things normally. To top it off, there's only one available pair of them, and Amir insists the ghastly red tint is necessary (though he doesn't seem to know why).
  Just *try* wearing them to a night on the town, though.
- Pen of Prosperity
  Coupons: 2
  This is a well-made, though fake, Mont Blanc pen with no specific distinguishing traits aside from the fact that it uses red ink. It doesn't work until you use it to sign the back of a credit or debit card. From then on, though, every good that you circle in a shopping catalog of some sort will be delivered to your exact location within 3 hours – and if you happen to be near home, it will be Louis

who comes to deliver it. The money will be drawn from the bank account tied to the card that you signed, noted as a card purchase with no other information – you cannot use the pen if you can't afford what you want to buy. The products must be from a publicly available shopping catalog, but that's all – you can use it to have products delivered that are illegal in your country or normally take a lot of paperwork to buy (for example a car). It supplies you with nothing aside from the specific good listed in the catalog, and can't buy you faked papers. Cars will have license plates, seemingly valid for the time and place you're in, but they won't check out if referenced with a database. If the signature is ever erased (and it's easy on most cards), the pen stops working until you sign a new one.

- Cigarettes of Truth
  Coupons: 2
  Whoever created this thing seems to have been a smidgen offbeat. It's a steel cigarette case, Camel-branded and from about 1950, give or take. It's far too beaten-up to sell to any collector – the lid doesn't even close properly – but has other uses. Inside the case are a few cut-outs from a mid-2000's teen magazine with the heading "Test: The Brand you Smoke Can Tell Us Who You Are", with a few snippets of test results readable on one of the moldering pieces. If you at any point concentrate on a person or a situation and reach into the case without looking at it, you'll come away with a cigarette of varying brand – it can dispense some really strange ones once in a while, though most of the results are major brands. The brand of this cigarette will tell you something about the person or situation, with the catch that there's not exactly a complete user's manual for something with so many possible results. A small key is available to you in the beginning, cobbled together from the fragments of magazine in the case and some of Amir's own tests – each brand has one meaning when drawn regarding a person and another when drawn over a situation. Marlboros mean "predictable" or "the situation won't change", Lucky Strikes mean "deceiving without lying" or "the situation has hidden depth", Vogues mean "selfish at the core" or "one person is the key", Newports mean "they have nothing to lose" or "the situation is only going to get worse", Camels mean "they won't stand by what they say" or "the situation is delicate", and Gauloises mean "taking orders from above" or "look to the past for the answer".
  As can be seen, the omens are strange and diffuse, but with enough notation, cross-referencing, revision and careful attention, the case can become one of the most versatile and useful magical items out there for its ability to cover basically every single possible situation in the world with *some* kind of relevant information. Until then, though, it's maddeningly diffuse.
  The cigarettes smoke just fine too, and are humidor-fresh.
- Presence Stone
  Coupons: 2
  This object is most definitely a mixed blessing. It's a small, uneven brown pebble about half the size of a golf ball, its only distinguishing feature being its oily luster. Any person who holds the stone on their person, whether they're holding it, wearing it as jewelry or stashing it in their bag, experiences anything they witness as if it was completely real. This has no effect most of the time, as most of what people witness is actually real – and on the plus side, it works as a remedy against depersonalization and derealization episodes. Of course, it really gets crazy when used with things that *aren't* real. The holder is unable to recognize fake objects unless they bear no resemblance whatsoever to the real thing – they'll be threatened by a fake gun, but will also wholeheartedly

believe that the fake gun they're brandishing is real (which can sometimes be an advantage). Impostors who look at least passably similar to the person they're mimicking also won't be recognized. The real fun part starts when fiction gets involved, though. If the holder is actively partaking of the fiction, it's not that dangerous – they'll keep on holding the book or the controller, still being able to read the book or play the game, but everything that happens in the fiction will be perceived as absolutely and indelibly real. Someone watching Star Wars while holding the stone completely perceives themselves to be *there* right next to every shot of blaster fire and every swing of the lightsaber, and the characters take on an unspeakably real depth that extrapolates from the actual movies. This is, of course, enough to add about 500 hours of incredibly enjoyable playtime to any game – and since the holder loses all sense of reality during the experience, any plot holes or technical shortcomings won't be obvious. The stone can turn watching Bloodrayne 2 into an enjoyable experience.

On the flipside, then, if the holder is faced with fiction that they didn't actively engage in themselves, all hell breaks loose. Showing a yakuza movie to an unsuspecting holder will convince them that scarred, grizzled men with guns and katanas really *did* just bust in and start shooting people – and the fact that it doesn't make sense will only sink in when the stone is removed from the person. Luckily for the holder, someone who knows the function of the stone can marshal up the willpower to throw it away – they don't know what's real and what's not, but they do know that they're perceiving everything as being real. Even unsuspecting holders don't have any compulsion to keep holding the stone, and they can perfectly well see that what happened was strange after discarding it.

- The Kowloon Compass

  Coupons: 3

  This isn't really a compass, in spite of the name – it's a small glass bauble on a chain, containing a small chip of concrete partially covered in red spray paint. Merely wearing the necklace will give you an instinctive knowledge of where the "bad part of town" is and how to get to it. While just wearing it doesn't tell you anything more specific, it still lets you unerringly find any parts of town with a high crime rate. If you hold the bauble in your hands and concentrate, it can do three different things. If you focus on finding a specific kind of service, for example guns or drugs, the concrete shard will gravitate towards the closest and easiest way to obtain these. If you use it when you're already in a bad part of town, it can give you a comprehensive knowledge of the area's history and basic street etiquette, enough to let you fit in and mind your own business while you're there. Finally, it allows you to "search" for criminals – just by willing it, you can impose a filter on the bauble's function, allowing you to narrow down your search to (for example) Russian gun dealers or low-ranking Mob thugs selling cocaine. The necklace's search function is actually quite reliable, following your specifications in both letter and spirit, and will never lead you into danger even when it might seem so. It also lets you know where your goal is and how far it is, allowing you to prepare in advance if you see fit.

  In addition, the necklace has a few passive functions. When worn, it acts as a good luck charm for any interactions with criminals – deals won't go bad unless you really fuck it up, you won't get completely fleeced and the threat of violence, while not nullified, becomes much smaller. If you are under any threat from a criminal source – an impending mugging, a mafia ambush, an approaching team of scammers – the fragment will start madly flying around inside the bauble, making a quiet

but persistent tinkling noise. If you touch the bauble during this time, the concrete fragment will point towards the safest direction to go in.

- Stalker's Portfolio
  Coupons: 3
  This is a simple black leather portfolio, which would fetch quite the resale price if it wasn't so mutilated. It's been scratched with compass points, burnt with cigarette embers and slammed against concrete, and that slightly flaky, brownish patch that came off when you first held the portfolio doesn't take much guessing to identify. If you think of a person while opening the portfolio for the first time, that person becomes the subject of the contents – if you're not actively thinking of anyone, it instead chooses the one person you're looking for the most. To name a person, you need to be able to decisively identify them – "whoever was messing around in my garden yesterday night" wouldn't work, as that someone has no identifying traits that you know of – however, "the frat boy who rear-ended my car a year ago" would. As long as you can identify the target as one specific person with distinguishing traits, they're a valid target.
  The portfolio contains a ledger on the target, a blueprint and a strip of 7 pictures worth of blank negative film. The ledger contains a specific spread of information on the target, scrawled in a tight and tangled handwriting and written in a terse, yet distinct language – name, age, birth date, hair color, eye color, blood type, race, current address of residence, height, weight, two personal quirks (not enough to completely dominate or blackmail the target, but enough to pretend to know them or seriously spook them) and finally a frontal mugshot of them. All of these are true as of the moment – the portfolio is unaffected by any kind of mundane deception, obfuscation or even lack of material. Only certain kinds of magical effects can jam the power of the portfolio, and for that to happen, the user has to know that the portfolio exists.
  The blueprint is of the target's home, and is composed of three stapled-together sheets – a map of the surrounding area, a top-down view of the main floor of the residence and a slightly simpler sketch of each floor. All three are accurate and meticulously annotated with optimal entry routes, escape routes, room purposes and even locations of importance such as the target's jewelry drawer.
  The film is perhaps the most obviously magical of the items. If you press a finger onto a piece of negative (which would ordinarily ruin it) while imagining the target in any situation at all, the image will appear clear as day on the negative and can be developed as normal. The image cannot show any other identifiable people besides the target – silhouettes or generic "men in suits" are fine, but not specific persons. While the film can portray outlandish and supernatural events, they have no particular persuasive power at all, and only people who believe in that specific type of supernatural phenomenon will pay it any heed at all – others will just treat it as the fabrication it is. The resulting photo has no clear identifying signs that it's a fabrication, but also has no decisive proof at all that it's real – it's up to the image and the circumstances if it will be seen as real or fake.
  The ledger and blueprints cannot simply be recalibrated to target another person, and the film does not reappear by itself. True to the name of the item, the portfolio has to be given some form of compensation. You can return the portfolio to its original state, erasing all information there but also making it available for further use, by willing it so at any point after doing one of the following: having sex with the target, killing them, severely traumatizing them or taking an important body part (a finger joint is the absolute minimum) for a trophy. This item is not good for your sanity, and

especially not considering that the time you spend alone with the portfolio doesn't really *feel* like alone time.

- The Tabloid Toolkit
  Coupons: 3
  This is a battered makeup case in hard-wearing plastic, large enough to have a handle and with the sorry remnants of a string of yellow nametag tape barely clinging on to the front – that is, the kind that might be found in any backstage storeroom all over the world. If used by someone who doesn't know of its properties, it's just a normal makeup kit – albeit it's pretty well stocked, and it never really seems to deplete no matter how much it's used. Simply knowing the function of the kit and intending to use it, then, is enough for its main effect to activate. The kit can be used to manifest actual physical changes if it's used on someone (which takes about as long as it would normally take to apply makeup), but only to the level of a tabloid Photoshop treatment. It can dye hair (with the use of a comb), change eye color (with the use of a varied stock of lenses), change skin color (using foundation) and correct practically any and all deficiencies in appearance. It can be used to change hair, eye and skin color, as well as remove existing blemishes, without being uncanny – while it can be used to straight-out make a person more beautiful, it's still that kind of plastic-like beauty that doesn't normally exist in real life outside of Photoshop and plastic surgery fringe cases. The kit can change minor physical elements aside from the face, but they're limited by what one would normally use Photoshop for – it can accentuate muscles and make breasts bigger, but nothing more than that. It can't create any unnatural skin colors – odd eye and hair colors fit under the purview of makeup, but skin color really isn't something that usually gets changed to an unnatural degree by makeup. It can elongate or shorten hair by up to six inches, as well as enlarge, shrink or alter the shape of facial features. There's technically no upper limit to the level of beauty you can create with this item, but at a certain level, the results start hitting the leftmost edge of the Uncanny Valley.
  To use the toolkit, you need to have at least a passing idea of how to put on makeup – not much, but if you haven't ever done it before, you'll need at least a few hours of practice (or the results will end up looking horribly uncanny). The more proficient you are at putting on makeup, the more you'll be able to get out of the kit – initially, it'll only really be useful for clearing away pimples and changing hair and eye colors to mundane shades, but after a few weeks of getting familiar with it, it can be used for all the functions described. In addition, the more practice you have with it, the more beautiful you can make yourself (or another) before toppling headlong into the Uncanny Valley. A few months of practice will likely be enough to let you look like a completely different person and even a different gender – while the core physical composition of a subject's body can never be changed (and neither can their voice – time for practice), the kit can still perform enough cosmetic changes to fool someone visually if the subject is clothed.
  The effects of the toolkit last for about six hours – strenuous physical activity, getting wet or horrible weather all shorten the duration by one to two hours. Makeup remover of any kind applied to the face will instantly dispel the effect.
- Hollywood Coffee Cup
  Coupons: 3
  This white porcelain workplace coffee cup is printed with the slogan "I Hate Hollywood", the letters halfway worn off the cup. The rim is chipped, and the concentric coffee rings inside it would put a

700-year-old sequoia to shame. It has two functions, one of which is rather more mundane than the other.

First off, any coffee, hot cocoa or whisky drunk from the cup (yes, you can sneak the whisky into the coffee – judging from the smell of evaporated bourbon practically embedded in the cup, you're not the first to think of it) will always aid any form of novel writing, scriptwriting or other job involving creating something textual for a work of fiction. Coffee will perk you right up, cocoa will give you a good night's sleep so you can write again the next day and whisky will put you into just the right maudlin, ink-spattered state of drunkenness to come up with something good.

The other function is that it allows you to create a text-based work of fiction that is at the very least enjoyable in record time – but it comes with a caveat. If you destroy a physical copy of a work of fiction – burn a Twilight book, crush a CD with Mass Effect on it, chop up a Naruto volume – and put the sorry leftovers into the cup with a bit of instant coffee, then pour water over it, it will become a sludgy and off-tasting, but wholly drinkable and non-harmful beverage. It can be any volume or part of a work – volume 1 of a book counts as the whole series if you wish so, but you do have to destroy a whole volume or other storage medium. It doesn't matter what medium the original work is – destroying a book will still let you create a script and vice versa. Drinking the beverage will fill your mouth with the taste of stale coffee grounds and your mind with inspiration – if you sit down and set off at least 24 hours for writing, you will be able to write out a work of fiction with supernatural speed and endurance. The inspiration will come to you naturally and fluently, and you'll be able to write a 500-page novel in 24 hours. The quality of the work is affected by your own writing ability, but it will always at the very least be enjoyable.

Then come the caveats. No matter what you do, the work will always come off as similar to what you used to fuel the coffee cup with. If you for example use Twilight, you'll end up writing something similar to it – whether in plot (a bland female main character moves to a small town and meets two mysterious men who vie for her affection) or in concept (a young-adult vampire novel with too much Mary Sue for most people's tastes). You can make the derivation less obvious by using 12 more hours on it, but it will still be visible to people who've read the original work reasonably recently. If you put too much work into making your work famous, you might be faced with straight-out copyright lawsuits, and no matter what, you'll never be able to divorce a work created using the cup from its source material. On the flipside, it also means that you capture any key themes or execute any key plot elements at least as well as the original. Using the cup also leaves you as completely knackered as you'd expect from spending 24 or more hours straight writing as if possessed, and you'll feel exactly as bad as you would if you did the same thing without the aid of the coffee cup. You also can't break away from the writing of your own free will unless your life is in danger – the cup is made to get your ass in gear and get you to write, and that's what it will do. If your life isn't in imminent and immediate danger, you won't even be able to break away to make it to your own wedding – and it also counts for eating and drinking, unless the food and drink is right next to you during the writing process. If you're physically pulled away from the writing device of your choice, too, all work you've done so far is wasted. You can use the cup as often as you want, but every time you **activate** it more than once within a month makes the end result worse and worse.

- The Devil's Playing Cards
  Coupons: 4

This faded, battered, beer-stained, coffee-spotted set of sticky playing cards looks to be at least three decades old if not more, and the face cards are in Cyrillic at that. They definitely bear signs of having been through a lot of different hands over the years, and some of the cards are so beaten up that most casinos wouldn't allow them – if you can count cards at all, you can count these. That goes for both you and your opponent. The margin of the Queen of Spades holds a single line in a tidy but almost illegibly small handwriting – "Damnation is a matter of choice".

The power of the cards, then, is both very straightforward and headache-inducingly complex in practice. If a willing bet is made over the cards before a game with two clearly defined sides, each side can wager an immaterial, intangible or otherwise normally untransferrable concept. The winner takes the pool, and the loser walks away with jack. Now, this is where it gets complicated. *Almost* everything can be wagered on the game, as long as the concept in question belongs to the bettor. This includes things such as emotions, *capacity* to feel emotions, memories, lifespan, personality aspects, talents, life situations, and even gender or identity. If the winner already has something mutually exclusive (for example gender or identity), their new acquisition takes priority. The loser completely loses what they put up, and in case of an unwise bet, this is capable of killing them or rendering them completely nonfunctional (for example a bettor losing his bet of the rest of his lifespan, or another bettor gambling her sanity and losing). The one caveat is nevertheless huge – the bettor must put up the stake of their own free will, with no form of coercion involved, or the bet just doesn't take. The most the owner of the deck can do is inform other people that they can actually *make* the bet, after which any further attempt at coercion will prevent the cards from working. The rule of thumb for being creative with these cards is that if it seems too good to be true, it probably either won't work or will only work halfway, but there are still a dizzying amount of uses for them.

The Man with the Green Tie

As you stand with the items you chose in your hands, Amir nods solemnly and takes an especially deep puff of his pipe. He slowly exhales a large, pearly cloud of flowery-smelling smoke, squeezing his eyes shut as if he was in pain. Before you can ask him about it, he holds up a hand to silence you, almost instinctively bowing at the same time. He takes another deep draw, then ashes his pipe fastidiously in an ashtray that's just as ridiculously baroque and kitschy as anything else in his office.

"Now, that's your signing bonus. You've probably been told that you'll be given another signing bonus by the Man with the Green Tie, no?"

Amir takes one look at your face and nods, the crease around his lips doing a good job of expressing pure, frustrated weltschmertz.

"You were brought here by Louis, I assume. He's, hmm, different from the other Recruitment goons. Most of the others know about as much as I do, but Louis seems to be really in on it. If I had to put a finger on it, I'd say that Louis is even different from you or me. I'm not sure how, and it sounds silly when I say it, but that's the impression I get."

Amir's expression turns even more pained, as if he's forcing himself to say something he's really far too polite for. He glances at the samovar, then pops a sugar cube in his mouth while pouring himself a small cup of pitch-black tea. He takes a gulp, then chews the sugar cube in his mouth with utmost concentration.

"Louis… I detest saying it, since he's a fine guy and nicer than he acts, but he might not have your best interests in mind. The Man with the Green Tie can give you a lot, but the greedy little worm won't ever let

you have something for free. I thought I'd trust him, and – "
Amir blinks hard, seemingly trying to squeeze back tears that aren't actually coming. He flashes his left hand above the desk for just a short moment, the pale depression of a long-worn ring now missing standing out vividly on his ring finger. When he registers that you've seen it, he nods his head towards the girl in the corner, now cleaning her nails with a flick knife of a size that's likely quite firmly illegal.
"Sloan might have something else to say about it, though. She claims she made a deal that went perfectly, and that I'm just blaming him for my own mistakes. Trust who you like. I know what I know, and I'm telling you only what I know for sure."
He turns to pour himself another cup of tea, his huddled body language making it quite obvious that he doesn't have the surplus for another word. The girl – Sloan – lights another cigarette and walks towards you, fixing you with a nasty glare and making slight waving motions towards the door.
Back in the reception, Sloan immediately sits on the counter – ignoring the chair behind it – and takes a flaring drag of her cigarette that crackles audibly and sends embers spiraling down towards the counter.
"Bloody hell. This happens every fucking time. Don't get me wrong, now, I like that goddamn Leb, but he always ends up gushing about his goddamn fiancée and his personal life every time we get a customer. You ask me, the Man with the Green Tie is just a businessman. He'll give you a signing bonus because he has to, but he'll try his best to walk away with a profit. Amir's just such a goddamn bleeding-heart milquetoast that he never caught on."
She shimmies a silver scrunchy off her wrist and loops it around her bleach-blonde hair in an uncannily practiced movement, all the while keeping her cigarette in her mouth (this one a Parliament).
"If I think you should know something, it's that Mr. Green Tie is different even from Louis. I'm not as posh as that over-integrated Leb in there, either – I can fucking say that I don't think Louis is human in the same way as the rest of us. I mean, he's human, of course – I've shaken hands with him, and he's just as solid as anyone else – but he's just not human in the same *way*. Green Tie, then, he's a real fucking tricky bugger, he is."
She takes the last drag off her cigarette while still holding it in her mouth, then spits it out admirably close but unfortunately far from an ashtray on the counter.
"So well, see ya, I guess. Lot of people who make the deal come round to us afterwards, since it's an easy place to work. Never made *that* deal myself, but I've seen a lot of you who did. Green Tie is probably gonna be here soon as I leave."
She jumps off the desk and takes a single step towards the door, throwing it open and half-running inside.
You turn around back towards the chair – and see someone sitting in it, smoking a small cigar and reading the Financial Times. He's almost uncannily average, by virtue of being just slightly uglier than your average yuppie – long-faced and pale, with a high hairline and frizzy brown hair partially breaking out of the iron-hard wax-and-spray treatment he's given it. He can't be more than 22, with buck teeth and a gangly build that makes his brown suit, white shirt and navy slacks look too big on him. The one thing that for some reason seems to fit perfectly on him is the objectively hideous double-wide dollar-bill-printed tie he's wearing. He glances over in your direction, flashing you a whitened, buck-toothed smile and walking in your direction, Financial Times still in his hand.
"Ah, hello, hello. Nice to meet you. I'm sorry for the suddenness, but I'm kinda on a time limit and can't stay too long."
He practically grabs your hand and shakes it exactly twice. Aside from the brusque approach, it's practically the Platonic idea of a handshake – firm, dry, warm and not a millisecond too long. He's definitely wearing

cologne, but just enough that it isn't overpowering – a crisp, dry scent that doesn't clash with the cigar smoke sticking to his suit lapels.
"You've probably been told, but I'm here to offer you a signing bonus of sorts. The basic deal is very sparse, I think – you just don't get your money's worth, so to say. That's why I volunteered as a contractor – to provide customers with just that little bit extra that leaves them feeling satisfied."
He takes a practiced puff of his cigar, making sure to blow the smoke away from you.
"I can walk you through my catalog now, if you want. I'm authorized to give you one bonus for free, but I understand if you don't think it's enough."
He smiles, showing whitened but definitely not corrected teeth – it's the first genuine, unguarded smile you've seen among the people here.
"I'm a contractor, though, and that means I can do business on my own. I'm not like these people here, toeing the line of what they consider "morally responsible" – I provide fully satisfying service for a very pleasant price. If you want to buy from me in person, you're welcome."

You can choose one free deal to make with the Man with the Green Tie. Any more you choose (up to two more) will come with a drawback, listed under the purchase's entry. If you think there's something in it for you, you may also refuse him.

- Love
  If you take this gift, you will always be guaranteed to have one true love. It might not be perfect, but you will always have a person in your life who really and truly loves you in a romantic and sexual way. You don't actively choose them, but they're drawn from people who match your tastes and preferences, and you will never tire of each other. You can still drive them away through being actively abusive, with all the consequences being abusive to your partner and them running away from you normally entails, but through chance or contrivance, you'll find a new partner within a week to a month.
  Drawback: If you take this gift on credit, your love is less constructive and more of a violation of a person's thoughts and soul. Whenever you fall in love with someone – no matter how many people are affected by the power already – they will come to love you in return, in spite of any incompatibilities between you. They'll find themselves unable to resist liking everything about you, and might either realize or remain unaware – and both are negative. Those who notice that their tastes are being twisted to like you will usually consciously be revolted while their subconscious pushes them at full power to love everything about you – not a healthy emotional experience, and an obviously supernatural one too (though victims will usually be too in love with you to snitch on you). Those who don't realize will keep on changing themselves and the way they act more and more to suit what you like, bending over backwards to please you – which can be fun at first, but quickly leads to sycophantic pseudo-stalkers with little personal integrity of their own, who're disturbingly willing to abandon friends and family solely to please you. Their friends and family can perfectly well become furious at you for doing this to the victim, even if they don't realize it's not a mundane effect.
- Youth
  If you take this gift, you will always look as young as can possibly be expected of a person your age. The effects of this vary with your actual age – a 15-year-old will look like a kid, which is not a unilaterally positive effect, but a 60-year-old will have kept about as well as Madonna (and they

don’t even have to use makeup or Photoshop at all). If you’re still in your twenties, you might get carded abnormally often, but you’ll look firmly like an adult once you pass the 30. You can also expect for your lifespan to be about 110 years all in all. You can still mature mentally and psychologically, as well as develop physically – the gift doesn’t affect your hormones, but only your physical appearance, which means that you can have a fully developed body while looking like a teenager at first glance.

Drawback: If you take this gift on credit, you’ll get the deal with all the strings attached. You get your wish – you’ll always be physically young and as beautiful as your chosen blueprint allows you to be. If you’re older than 25, you “de-age” in real time until you reach the looks of a 25-year-old. On the flipside, you’ll always be young – while you’ll age until the 25 and thus not constantly be carded, people will probably start getting suspicious when they realize you still look 25 when you’re 40. Makeup and plastic surgery can explain a lot of things, given, but even those have their limits. If you use this to de-age yourself more than 10 years, too, be prepared to answer some very hard questions or have to skip town for a new identity somewhere (however you’re planning to do that). It also keeps you from psychologically maturing and fixing the immature aspects of your personality – if you were a loudmouth with no brain-mouth filter before taking this gift, no amount of time or practice (save for other magical effects) can get rid of that trait.

- Riches

  If you take this gift, you won’t just receive money – you will, by chance or contrivance, end up in one of the highest-paying positions possible with your qualifications. There’ll always be that middle management position open, your superior might suddenly retire and pin you as his replacement or someone will scout you for a position that you’re perfectly qualified for – basically, you’ll be paid as much as is reasonably possible for your credentials. This means that while you can make a lot of money with a janitorial job (ministries and other high-level governmental facilities need cleaning too), you’ll still end up making more if you have a business degree or a medical doctorate. The gift doesn’t make the job any easier, and it doesn’t prevent you from being fired if you really bollocks up something, but even if you do get canned, you have another well-paying job waiting in a few weeks.

  Drawback: If you take this gift on credit, the cons of “I wish I had a million dollars” come into play. You will receive a blank white credit card in a letter with no return address the seventh day after the deal. This card’s transactions will always go through without issue, allowing you to make large cash withdrawals and Internet purchases all you want – but there’s not actually any money making it back to the service provider, whether it’s a bank or a shop, and this will be obvious if the party in question actually takes a long, hard look at their account history. If you overstretch it, at least one company will probably sic the police on tracing the garbled error messages that pop up instead of transaction records – and while the error messages themselves aren’t traceable, the times and locations of your purchases are still clear as day. There’s no predetermined sum or time at which people will find out, but generally, the more careful you are, the longer it’ll take before the card brings you trouble. Anyone who’s ever had a seemingly unlimited sum of money between their hands, though, will know exactly how hard it is to keep oneself in check, and the trouble *will* come at some point in the future.

- Sex

  Slightly but very importantly different from the wish for love, this gift will let you get sex without

strings attached. You receive a phone number starting with 555 – if anyone but you attempts to call it, they'll only get a busy tone. If you call it, a man's voice will answer you on the other end in slightly accented English and ask you what, or who, you want today. You can only make one request a day, and you can only ask for one person at once – it *is* possible to get two partners at once by calling just before midnight and again just after, taking advantage of the fact that the deal lasts for four hours, but the man on the other end of the phone might get cross if you shamelessly exploit the system. Fifteen minutes after the call, the kind of person you specified will meet you at your current location, wherever you are, and be completely willing to have any kind of sex whatsoever. It's important to note that the partners brought in by this gift aren't entirely real – on one hand, you won't have to have any moral qualms about what you do to them or how you want them to look and act, but on the other hand the pillow talk is uncanny, as the partners cannot do much outside of having sex and accompanying things (roleplay, for example). The partners can be any gender, age and build that you want, as long as it's even remotely biologically possible – it doesn't matter if you have to point to the Guinness Book of Records or a tabloid picture, it just has to be possible in real life by some stretch. After the duration expires, the partner disappears – mostly, they do so through contrivances such as "going into the kitchen to cook breakfast and have a cig", but if given no such excuses, they'll disappear into thin air.

Drawback: Taking this gift on credit can be slightly unpleasant. The first noticeable change is that the man on the line will become a great deal chattier – he'll mention something about a "low-level contract" and laugh to himself at first, but will refuse to answer questions about the inner workings of the system. He does have a lot of life experience to share, but most of it is definitely distasteful and/or outrageously criminal. He sounds like he's in his forties or fifties, with a vaguely Slavic accent and a strange sense of rambling, anecdotal gallows humor – he's the kind of person who's unnerving at first, then funny and finally grating. He'll enthusiastically offer you all sorts of encounters, and will go at length about "today, then I can offer you three redheads at once, and very beautiful! Just with police, hush-hush, hmm? Age is, ah, yes." The encounters last for up to six hours, and while you can't request multiple partners at once, the man on the end of the line (who unconvincingly claims to be called Nigel and can't even pronounce it all that well) will regularly call with offers that might include multiple partners. These calls can get unwelcome if Nigel decides that he has a deal for you at an inopportune moment, but he does learn your likes and dislikes.

The big drawback is that these people are real. Instead of creating figments to your specifications, the deal has real people matching your specifications called in to your location, with no memory of how they got there and a powerful compulsion to have sex with you. The power still has the same limitations as when it's not taken on credit, and certain sexual encounters might get troublesome if you're caught red-handed. Anything you do to your partners will remain when they're sent back to where they come from – Nigel claims that he "borrows them during dreams", and indeed he always offers people from regions where it's around midnight at the time.

- Fame

  If you take this deal, the Man with the Green Tie will just smile warmly and pull out a folded-out contract and a Mont Blanc pen from his suit pocket. It's a rather ordinary contract between an agency and an artist, except for the fact that the field for the artist's profession is also blank for you to fill in. Through contrivance or coincidence, you'll find success in whatever kind of artistic pursuit you write in (if you ask for academic fame, the Man with the Green Tie will suck his teeth, frown

and mutter something about “we’re not allowed to do that, it clashes with the plans”). The fame won’t be anything Beatles-level, but perhaps Phish-level – while you won’t become seminally world-famous, you’re still guaranteed to sell out Roskilde stages or put out best-selling comics. The contract will give you talent if you don’t have it in the first place, but it’s a lot more effective (the difference between Escape the Fate and Fall Out Boy, to put it in emo metaphors) if you do have it. The rest is pretty much up to you – you’ll become famous, but it’s up to you what you do with it. You can’t get scandaled out of your fame, but it can tint it – if you act out like a cross between Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty, you’ll probably become famous for doing a ton of drugs and living the rock’n’roll life. Conversely, keeping a nice boy/girl-next-door image will make your fame a nice, easy-to-swallow household fixture, and while you won’t be invited to many pool parties, you’ll have a solid reputation. Of course, being famous isn’t easy, and this contract doesn’t make it so – you’ll still have to deal with the myriad hang-ups of being a celebrity, and the contract will only make and keep you famous. Also, as a side note, the Man with the Green Tie will actually act as your manager and agent in practice – at least as far as everyone else thinks, he’s a former Warner Brothers hotshot talent scout and manager by the name of Norman Kaufmann who split off to found his own company. In person, he’s nice, avuncular and personable, but has he ever got a gall bladder instead of a heart when it comes to business – he works with making money, and he’d rather be slowly roasted over hellfire for all eternity than let a single cent slip between his fingers.

If you take this deal on credit, you *do* get being famous for free. You’ll be allowed to coast through life like the rockstars only do on MTV, being famous because the public coincidentally took a fancy to you and the media were eager to follow the trends. You’ll never have to do much more work than five-six hours a week, and you’ll still remain famous even if you do nothing much. However, your fame is parasitic – you become famous by riding on trends other people have created and stealing the spotlight away from them, and you attract scandal like moths to a flame in order to remain in the public’s eyes. No matter what you do, you can’t avoid scandals, and you’ll attract more negative attention than positive – think Miley Cyrus at the worst low point of her career, and you’re just about there. Alternately, continuing the emo metaphor, a more famous Ronnie Radke. You’ll be swimming in money, sipping Dom Perignon in Jacuzzis the size of a parking lot while surrounded by supermodels, waking up to freshly-imported Colombian cocaine and eating for free at Michelin-starred restaurants for the publicity – but eventually, you’ll turn all of show business into either your bitter enemies or just lampreys who want to feed off your fame, and your tendency for scandal means that your fame gets you a lot fewer favors than you’d assume. You’ll be plagued by paparazzi, be blown up on the front page of The Daily Mail and appear on prime-time talk shows (God have mercy on your soul).

By the time you die, very few people will honestly miss you.

Companion

“Project AHR End User’s Manual, Page 9.

Due to the large-scale nature of the project, we can also offer the opportunity to assist with a sub-project designed to measure the effects of the project’s procedures on social interaction at an everyday level, as well as the interactions between different recipients of the procedures. If you, as the Client, so desire, you may choose to make yourself eligible for cohabitation with one, and only one, fellow volunteer for the Project. The other subject will be chosen through analysis of personal data coupled with a personal meeting

in which you can interact with your potential cohabitant.

Due to scarcity of resources and in the interests of neutral research results, we sadly cannot and will not at any point be able to offer the opportunity for more than one cohabitant. You can also decline, or leave an "open invitation" if you have no objections to who you will share housing with. Even in the case that you give the open invitation, however, you can still file for the suspension of the cohabitation plan later if you severely dislike your roommate – our clients are as dear to us as family, and your needs will be catered to whenever we have the surplus.

The following is a list of existing project volunteers who have signed themselves up on the open-invitation list. If you do not desire a cohabitant, we can also offer the opportunity for a company-appointed supervisor, whose duty will be to observe your daily life and report on any events of note to the Company, as well as provide aid and protection in accordance with Document 3.2.15 (apply to the Senior Customer Service Representative for a copy of this) if it should ever become necessary."

- "Cherry", Tweenage Girl
  Prefers: Middle-aged men, caring people with a long attention span
  Dislikes: Middle-aged women
  Will refuse: Girls her age, loners, fastidious people with no time for her
  The girl known as Cherry could probably topple a few beauty pageants all on her own – strawberry-blonde hair, crop tops, hotpants, a golden suntan, plenty of jewelry and a body shape that's admittedly far from impossible but still quite a find. She's extremely secretive about her real name – and her real age, too.
  + If you're the brains or the brawn, Cherry's the beauty. She's extremely beautiful, talented with cosmetics, a fashion genius and can wrap most men around her little finger.
  + Shrewd if not straight-up smart, and gets good hunches that usually turn out to be mostly true
  + Has her own signing bonus (Tabloid Toolkit) that she's willing to share – it's still hers, though
  +/- Not only down to fuck, very insistent on it. She will get clingy and pleading if you don't have sex with her at least weekly.
  - Histrionic and demanding, and can get shrill and desperate if she's not in the spotlight. Likewise obsessed with clothes and makeup, and refuses to wear anything that doesn't make her look sexy in her own eyes.
  - Busy with her school social life and considers it more important than anything else – even you, no matter how well you get along. She's still in junior high too, with all that entails.
  - You're 99% sure she used to be a guy – her idea of how tweenage girls behave is occasionally uncannily stereotypical and overly feminine, and she's unnaturally insistent on reminding everyone that she's a beautiful young girl
- Samuil Aleksandrovich Petrov, Hard-Ass Hired Killer
  Prefers: Similar brooding and self-important types
  Dislikes: Women, people under 20
  Will refuse: Anyone who wants to help, reassure or change him
  Samuil is quite the sight – a forty-something Russian man at just past seven feet, with a head of short greying hair, a salt-and-pepper beard, a huge scar on his cheek and a pair of sunglasses that he never takes off. His trademark shin-length dark-grey wolf-fur coat is all but glued to his body, he smokes Belomorkanal cigarettes like he was paid for it and speaks in a growly bass that literally

shakes windowpanes.
+ Possibly the most intimidating person in the country – a grizzled mountain of muscle and sinew whose snarling voice, guttural Russian accent and seven-foot height can make all but the most hardened criminal turn tail and run
+ As strong as he looks, with a build that makes most blows simply bounce off – bring a gun or run away
+ Knowledgeable and experienced when it comes to killing people and getting away with it, be it poisons, firearms or brute force. He can clean up after all of it, too.
+/- Carries roughly six weapons on him at any given time, all of which are illegal and/or have the serial number filed off. Keep him away from police searches.
- Gloomy, curmudgeonly and maudlin, to the point of being angsty. Will never shut up about how hard his life is and how hardened it has made him, and has a throaty, cynical one-liner for every occasion (they're all hopelessly unfunny).
- Drinks like a kitchen sink. Smokes like a chimney. Does both where it's forbidden. He'll share if you ask, but he only drinks pull-top plastic-bottle vodka and only smokes Belomorkanal.
- Defensive and uncooperative as soon as anything doesn't involve killing or playing cool. Reacts with hostility to all attempts to help him, no matter how much he genuinely needs it. Will play coy by stringing along angsty remarks and then snap at you when you bring it up.

- Rose Mitchells, Tumblrina
  Prefers: People who used the procedure to change gender, social-justice activists
  Dislikes: Mathematical types, right-wingers
  Will refuse: Outright bigots or homophobes, super-macho men
  Rose Mitchells could be used as a stock image for the word "SJW" – she's a chubby woman in her very early 20's, with thick-rimmed black glasses, a puffy mane of brown hair and a taste in clothes that incorporates a very noticeable amount of "ethnic" patterns and fabrics. She's seemingly never entirely at ease – when she's happy, she's fidgety and jumpy, and when she's upset, she's on a hair trigger.
  + Actually a very nice person despite her mood swings – kind, tolerant, open-minded and a good listener. She's suspicious towards anyone who resembles a typical fedora – neckbeards, fedoras and black waistcoats set off her alarms – but will still try to be nice just in case they are.
  + Intelligent and an interesting discussion partner – she loves to think, and she'll gladly bring her considerable IQ to bear if you need it
  + A great, though slightly preachy, artist, and absurdly productive at that – and she does requests for free (okay, payment is in cocoa powder) just to do something new
  +/- Used to be a guy, and will gladly admit it. She's actually not unreasonable about this specific aspect of social justice, and admits that the only reason she's happy now is probably that she got a miracle solution – by now, she doesn't believe that a full transition would ever be medically possible.
  - In terrible shape, and won't be helping you with anything physical any time soon. When asked to lose weight, she either gets defensive and claims thin privilege, or complains about how she'll never be able to do it and that she should just go eat more Ben & Jerry's.
  - Martyr complex – will tolerate a lot when it's directed at her, but will **snap** if anyone insults another minority.

- Addictive personality – bring any kind of drug close to her, and she will develop a problem. If you don't regularly sell or use drugs, she'll find her own hookup in a few years.

- "Sidney", Natural Disaster
  Prefers: People with entertaining reactions to the absurd, anyone who can keep his pace
  Dislikes: People with good common sense, careful people
  Will refuse: Killjoys, conservatives, teetotalers
  Everyone knows a guy like Sidney. His real name is a total mystery, he shows up uninvited all the time but still manages to make himself welcome, he's always drunk and his imagination could probably revolutionize science if he used it for other purposes than breaking things and ingesting intoxicants. He's tall and skinny, with brown hair, a high forehead and slightly crossed brown eyes with deep bags under them, and usually wears a battered brown fishbone dress shirt with holey jeans and holds a supermarket bag full of assorted groceries wherever he goes.
  + An amazing entertainer and party clown, with fantastic story-telling abilities and a vast imagination that makes it nearly impossible to figure out if he's lying or not
  + Always, I repeat, always has booze, cigarettes and drugs. If they have been confiscated, he will find more. He can find drugs in Japan and Australia at that, and he'll only be dry in completely uninhabited wastelands.
  + Tough as nails and twice as stubborn – he's hard-bitten, resourceful and can find his way out of damn near any situation alive. "Alive" does not mean "in perfect shape", however.
  +/- Resourceful in all the wrong ways – he's always making drugs from instructions he found on the Internet, rigging together improvised explosives and finding new and inventive ways to get shitfaced.
  - Sometimes not stupidly resourceful, but just plain stupid – no common sense, refuses to change his mind, does puerile things for the hell of it
  - Addicted to at least three drugs in excess of alcohol and cigarettes, and will insist to the last that he's not even when in severe withdrawals
  - Deep down, just a slightly damaged escapist with no real future prospects who'll probably live a hell of a life but die at 27

- Sandra Inouye, Pro Wrestler
  Prefers: People who know when to shut up, potential rivals
  Dislikes: People who're easily cowed, teetotalers
  Will refuse: N/A. Sandra won't refuse anyone, even if she hates them – if they're easily cowed, she'll bully them, and if they're impossible for her to beat, she takes it as motivation.
  Sandra Inouye is a relatively short and wiry woman with brown hair and that peculiar part-tanned, part-Asian and part-Caucasian skin color that's common in Japanese-Hawaiians. She wears her hair in a stumpy ponytail and mostly just wears T-shirts and hoodies with tracksuit pants (and all three are usually merchandise that she got for free). She doesn't look like a pro wrestler with her clothes on, but she definitely has the attitude.
  + Garrulous, friendly and outgoing once she gets to know you – if you're her friend at all, you're her best friend and she'll always remind you of it.
  + Surprisingly famous among a niche group of women's wrestling fans – she's competed in America and in Japan, and has friends in both countries. She also knows pretty much every wrestling-themed bar in the Northern Hemisphere (a surprising amount) from the inside, since she gets free

drinks there.
+ Surprisingly good at teaching, if not book-smart, and will gladly teach you how to defend yourself. If you want to learn the ins and outs of women's pro wrestling, too, she's happy to help. Of course, she's also a professional herself, and it's not just for show – she's great in a fight and knows how to look impressive while beating someone up.
+/- Loyal, proud and honorable, and it's a mixed blessing. She never lets anyone take back an insult or hurt a friend, and no matter what the circumstances, she won't let go of someone who's pissed her off until one of them is in the hospital.
- Uncomfortable and distrustful around new people, as expected of someone who's constantly moved back and forth between three cultures her whole life. She's standoffish and suspicious around everyone until she's really gotten to know them over a few beers.
- A bad drunk and a heavy drinker. She's okay for the first three beers, your best friend in the whole world for the next three, and past that she becomes either an overdramatic, sobbing wreck or hair-trigger aggressive.
- Something to prove, perhaps from her life before the procedure. She never says no to a challenge, no matter what, and she's a sore loser – while she won't doubt the results, she'll be in a horrible mood for days whenever she loses anything and won't rest until she's gotten revenge.

- Sloan Browne, Ex-Charver (or so the company says)
Prefers: Down-to-earth people who like to party
Dislikes: High-brow, pretentious or intellectual people
Will refuse: Most people, if she was allowed to (she isn't)
Asking Sloan whether she's willing to be your observer will elicit a reaction that's more at home in a teen movie than in reality – eye-rolling, retching and a drawn-out, drawled "really?"
She's not exactly used to having people over, and will complain incessantly, but she's at least a reasonably mundane roomie, even if she doesn't do much more than just be a roomie.
+ A master of minding her own business when she has to – can spot a clue from miles away and will always keep out of your affairs
+ Always fresh on a party, and knows how to have a blast – albeit her taste in parties leans towards snakebites in plastic cups and house music played from an MP3 player, a party organized by her will always be fun
+ Just plain old-fashioned mean – quick to pick a fight and hell-bent on winning it, even if she has to bite, go for the eyes or grab cutlery from the kitchen. She's not only nasty in a fight, but also outside of it – just the sight of her with something as improvised as a potato peeler leaves no doubt that she's already had a few good ideas how to use it on a person.
+/- Gets completely fearless when she's drunk or on speed, and she's one of the people for whom self-confidence translates straight into skill. If she gets tanked enough on Buckie and vodka, she could probably pull off a bank robbery with a cool head – but she's still not infallible, and the problem is that she gets to think she is.
- A complete wastoid who can't hold down even a McJob for more than a month and shamelessly leeches on any form of social welfare provided to her. She'll steal and lie to keep from working, and the only thing she'll do in her daily life if she has a choice is hang around the house in her tracksuit, smoking two packs of cigarettes a day and doing whatever drugs she can find.
- Still has her job with the company, and occasionally gets dragged away to do something she won't

tell you about. Most of the time, she's back on time, but occasionally, she's on a job that requires her to drown her sorrows afterwards – and Sloan gets violent and irrational when she drinks to forget.

- Not a good companion in a social context unless you're really dealing with the lowest of the low – she has greasy bleach-blonde hair with grown-out roots, wears a stained Adidas tracksuit and has a pasty, acne-cratered face. Etiquette is completely beyond her, too.

- Amir ibn-Mostafa ibn-Tawfiq, Walking Neurosis
  Prefers: "I'm alright with whatever, thank you." (Hobbyists, history geeks, artists)
  Dislikes: "Oh no, I couldn't. Hang on, I'll make tea." (Anyone who dislikes the kind of art you can pick up and touch)
  Will refuse: Do you think he could?
  If you ask Amir whether he'd like to apply for cohabitation as your observer, he'll practically be over the moon with delight, knocking over most things in the room and constantly pausing to apologize for it. He's exactly the same in private as he is in business – nervy, neurotic, apologetic and one of the most honestly nice and caring people you'll ever meet.
  + Collector extraordinaire, with a treasure trove of all sorts of curiosities and everyday relics that are every archeologist's wet dream; will auction some off if broke, but will act like he has to sell his own children.
  + Historical genius – believe it or not, a UCL-educated Doctor of Archeology at a paltry 31 years old, specializing in everyday articles of past civilizations. Too low on self-esteem to make much of it, but has been published in *Science* once and fully deserves it – and while he doesn't dare imagine it, some people remember him and would do him a good turn for his eminent and quite honestly groundbreaking paper on cosmetics in Ancient Rome.
  + Helpful, selfless and a fantastic listener – he can listen as well as he can speak, and he's not bothered in the least by people talking about their own interests for four hours (in fact, he loves it). Gives great counseling and advice, and would never dream of not being there for you if you ever need him.
  +/- Dealer in magical items of different sorts, from the benevolent to the disturbing. He loves each of his items as if it was a venerated family pet, but will use them in tight situations if he has to – and it pretty much always helps quite a lot. He still has to keep most of them so he can distribute them on his superiors' behalf, though, and his shop is always attracting weird people.
  - That neurosis. Amir has no self-confidence, self-esteem or self-worth, and he's skittish, neurotic and generally all over the place. He's a scaredy-cat and a coward who overthinks everything twice over, and while he means well, it often impairs his usefulness if he or a friend risks getting killed.
  - High most of the day, though you wouldn't know it – cannabis and opium are the only things that keep him sane, as he's naturally neurotic in the first place and his job has completely fried his nerves. If he's ever caught sober, he's completely useless.
  - Insists on cooking, but has a deficient sense of taste – he's technically good, but he over-spices **everything** just so he can taste it. Get ready for two teaspoons of dried sage per meal.

- Louis
  Prefers: Absolutely no one
  Dislikes: Damn near everyone
  Will refuse: No one

If you personally ask Sloan (who'll retch theatrically during your whole request), Louis is technically qualified to be an observer, and it seems like his bosses have a job or two to put him on that would benefit from him being out and about among the procedure recipients. He's just as cranky about it as he is about everything else, but you get the feeling that he hates being together with you a lot less than most other things (he still doesn't *really* like it, though).

+ A long-haul driver by trade, and amazing at it. Actually, he's a little too amazing – he never gets lost, can find his way to more or less anywhere as long as he can get there by car, seemingly doesn't need to sleep at all and knows any car he sits down in like he's driven it for a lifetime.

+ Not *too* scary in a fight on his own, but he has a few seriously uncanny tricks up his sleeve. If he has to fight someone, he usually just looks in their direction, and *something* descends from the skies (or ceiling) and starts tearing wildly at them. This *something* is a heat-haze-like blur in the air the size of a Great Dane, with claws that are evidently razor-sharp judging from the horrible cuts they make on their victim. It smells of chlorine and ammonia and screeches like a cross between a housecat in a pitched fight and a garbage compactor chewing up scrap metal. It's about twice as hard to wrestle with or otherwise kill as a Great Dane would be, and it's almost invisible at that.

+ Cool-headed, intelligent and a jack-of-all-trades – he knows how to drive a car, repair a computer, repair household electronics, field-strip a gun, fix plumbing and many other things. He's not especially *fantastic* at any of these things save for the driving, but he's solidly skilled in an amazing amount of things.

+/- Probably not human, and acts like it. He's a good liar, seemingly having only the barest sense of shame that only comes in when talking to potential recruits, and never lets human dignity stop him from delivering a whopper of a lie with a completely straight face – but he's also an emotional dead fish who doesn't really *get* people on an empathic level. As a side note, he does have a legal identity as the Birmingham-born Louis St. James, but his short pauses before he mentions his name makes it pretty obvious it's not actually his real one.

- His job is more important to him than you are, and while it won't always get in the way, it's bound to do once in a while. He comes and leaves the house at odd hours with no warning at all, and he refuses to really tell you about what's going on – though as you've experienced, he seems to feel guilty over bringing new people into the fold, and he occasionally lets little clues slip.

- His reflection is really goddamn uncanny – while it has to be a proper silver mirror (cameras are fine, as are windows and any mirrors that don't use a silver coating), his reflection shows in silvered mirrors as something completely non-humanoid. It's mostly reminiscent of something like a stunted, bony winged creature with scaly greyish skin, half the height of a human and hunched down even further. It's hard to see mostly because it's always swathed in a cloud of noxious, dark-gray smoke speckled with unnaturally red embers.

- Cranky, cantankerous, tetchy, moody, sullen, crabby, snappy, bad-tempered and at least half a dozen other adjectives. He's especially bad on Monday mornings, on which you're lucky if you get a reply from him that isn't a nasty, vitriolic insult. He doesn't hate *you*, and might actually come to be wholly neutral about you – he just seems to hate everything else.

Conditions

It's done – the process is over, and it's been for a few days by now. Perhaps the most unnerving thing about the procedure was that it wasn't hard or painful – you'd have expected that there would be some sort of

resistance or struggle between you, the process and the blueprint, but the speed and ease with which it happened was uncanny. The last thing you really remember before the deal was finalized was the Man with the Green Tie noticing something outside the door and rushing out, and as soon as you'd registered that, you were practically already waking up in a foreign but oddly familiar bed.

It hasn't been easy for the last few days, but it's looking up – you're getting used to your new "blueprint", though no one ever told you anything about exactly how the blueprints were chosen and why. Louis did pop by once, steaming on a crooked Benson & Hedges and looking like he'd been driving for days without rest, but he was even more evasive than he usually was – he stayed at yours for all of twenty minutes, pounding a Special Brew while smoking four cigarettes, then excusing himself after a tense, small-talky conversation peppered with periods of awkward silence. Amir did call to say he'd be coming over and giving you as much of a down-low as he could, but he had to call off two hours ahead because of "conditions outside of his control" and sent Sloan instead, who just shot you a sour glance, exchanged a few vinegary bromides and spent the next half-hour tapping her foot and brushing off attempts at starting conversation while waiting for her cab.

You did get what you paid for, though, and there have been no kinks or inaccuracies in the contract so far – but that tenth page of the contract lying on your desk does seem a bit unnerving.

"Project AHR End User's Manual, Page 10: Terms and Conditions

By making any form of edit or modification to these documents with any form of writing device (checking any boxes, entering any special requests), you provide your legal consent to the following points.

1. You will not disclose, imply or hint at the specifics or generals of the Procedure to any person or entity who is not employed or in a contractual relationship by Cranmer Innovations and Developments, LBG ("Us", "the Company" or "We" in the rest of the document, as the Client is assumed to always have had access to the Terms and Conditions). Violation of this point will result in the immediate termination of any contractual relationship with the Company. By making any edits to this document, you agree to waive your legal rights regarding any personal injury or death, whether physical or mental, that might occur from the immediate termination of the contract.
2. You will not act irresponsibly or incautiously in such a way that any law-enforcement agency, neighborhood watch, volunteer group or corporation will be informed of the activities of the Company. Violation of this point will result in the same consequences as the violation of point 1.
3. You will immediately inspect any social-network services your new blueprint uses for information regarding a Mr. Lawrence Matlock. If Mr. Matlock is not on your friend/contact list on any social-networking services you use, please inform our Junior Customer Feedback Receptionist, Ms. Sloan Browne. You will receive feedback on whether or not your request has been accepted within 2-4 weeks. Ms. Browne is also available for other complaints, but we offer no guarantee that she is available, as our human resources are limited.
4. You will not attempt to avoid, cut short or otherwise interrupt any social interaction with Mr. Matlock. If you have signed any auxiliary contracts with our external contractor Mr. Norman Kaufmann (informally nicknamed "the Man with the Green Tie"), our contract with Mr. Kaufmann sadly obliges us to include a certain degree of countermeasures in order to serve his personal interests, and we will have to include a personality element in your blueprint that will compel you to subconsciously seek out Mr. Matlock if you attempt to avoid him. We in Cranmer Innovations

and Developments apologize deeply for this violation, but the circumstances are out of the control of our company, as we are simply a branch company of Mr. Kaufmann's company.

Indeed, looking at your friend lists, you quickly find out that they include a man by the name of Lawrence Matlock – a man in his thirties with a barely detectable Hispanic edge to his features, with a thinning head of dark-brown hair and an easy, crooked smile. As you look at his picture, you remember who he is to your blueprint – a friend of a friend of a friend who you met at a party you weren't sure you were invited to, but he helped you in anyway. He struck you as so friendly that he was bound to make enemies – a gushing, charismatic and deeply helpful man who seemed completely incapable of saying no to anyone. As far as you remember, he's an IT innovator who's deeply but unobtrusively religious – a large amount of his income gets poured into various neo-Christian charities and religious organizations. He's not the kind of man many people would like to be involved with – a blithe and charitable man who seems completely oblivious to the bitter conflicts he leaves in his wake. He's a social butterfly who makes friends with the most unlikely and controversial people, then brings them all to the same soirées – and over the years, it's led to the religious organizations he sponsors being locked in a vicious conflict with his investors, who consider his religious bent (and irresponsibly huge charitable donations to dubious neo-Christian groups) to be a blemish on an otherwise talented businessman.

Right at the present, the conflict is dangerously close to boiling over – on one side, the recipients of Matlock's charity include the very literal-minded Church of God's Angels, who believe that angels are not only metaphors or immaterial messengers, but walk the Earth in human form and can be called down to aid the faithful. The Church of God's Angels suffered a massive setback five years ago that nearly killed the sect – they'd given a 12-year-old girl in their community a lot of media exposure for her unshakable faith and talent for making the otherwise flaky sect seem like something beautiful. When she herself decided that she wanted to pray for a friend who'd gotten sick, they let her pray for as long as she wanted, and only opened the door to the prayer room when raided by the police after two weeks and ordered at gunpoint to open the door – and perhaps as expected, the sect had let the girl starve herself to death. The Church of God's Angels is getting back on its feet by now thanks to Matlock's donations, even if some of the scandal and outrage still sticks, and they are **not** about to let Matlock be stolen away from them.

On the other side stand Matlock's investors, who consider him the best thing to happen to IT since Bill Gates or Steve Jobs – Matlock is charismatic, creative, adaptive, good CEO material and with a serious knack for making *just* enough money that he comes off as neither untalented nor greedy. They worry for his future, though – he's flaky and very religious in private, and he strews money around to different religious groups who his investors suspect are manipulating him and leeching off his friendly nature. They're ready to do just about anything to make sure the potential next Steve Jobs doesn't get fleeced and thrown out by mainly the Church of God's Angels, and that their profits don't disappear with Matlock's career.

The Church of God's Angels has just bought up a very nondescript storage complex in a likewise nondescript hilly part of the country, and they're talking in circles whenever they're asked what they'll use it for – and the investors have coincidentally decided to all invest in the same bodyguard company with a reputation for brutality and a track record of handling crowds well. All in all, things look like they're going to get *very* messy.

Something rather strange happens on the night between the seventh and the eighth day. If you were a slight bit less experienced with whatever it is that's going on, you'd call it a dream, albeit a very real and chilling one. By now, though, it seems hard to imagine that it's a dream, or even that it's *really* reality. The

closest the feeling could be described in human words is that of being in two places at once – there's a clear sense of you being back home in your bed, sleeping soundly, but also an irrevocable sense that you, in another sense than your body, are somewhere else.

Wherever you are, it's cold. It's less of a freezing cold than the very specific point at which it becomes painful – your hands and nose sting, and your breath steams ever so slightly. As is common in dreams, the elements unfurl themselves one by one, snapping cleanly into existence as soon as you realize that they should have been there all along. The cold white desk in front of you – smooth to an unbelievable degree, completely devoid of gnarls or imperfections. The darkness around you, less an ordinary absence of light than the strange and indelible feeling that you are not seeing anything because you *should* not, *must* not. Something glows from far above, its sterile light far enough away to make the shadows of your fingers into a myriad spastic, tangled half-shadows. That dream-knowledge is stronger now – the unquestioning acceptance that you *must* not look up, that it is forbidden, needing no excuse or explanation.

A sharp rap echoes in the darkness, and the woman in front of you – unseen until now, but as all the other things about this place seeming like she's always been there and was always supposed to – fixes you with a stare hidden behind her sunglasses. She's less reminiscent of a businesswoman than a statue of a businesswoman – a seamless, pitch-black suit jacket, a tie of an unnaturally vibrant red, hair like an oil slick and a pair of narrow black shades.

"So."

Her voice is beyond uncanny – it's less of a sound than a whip-crack of reality, sounding more like the laws of physics breaking like bubble wrap under a child's fingers than an actual application of acoustics.

"You know by now. Lawrence Matlock. He's a nuisance. We try to help."

After each carefully spaced four-syllable sentence fragment, her words hang in the air like cracks in a windowpane struck by a rock.

"It's not easy. The world's not right. We try our best. He doesn't know. It's the best we can do."

Her words layer themselves in a low, susurrating cacophony just on the edge of your hearing – a high, shrill noise similar to tinnitus.

"I'll be brief. They can't be allowed to make it happen. They'll *set it up*."

An immaterial impression hangs in the air – the feeling of something infinitely bigger than you being *terrified*.

"They'll tell you they're saving the world. They'll tell you *everything*. Sometimes you don't need to know."

The echoes of her voice drift through the chill air like whiplashes, reverberating in the distance – impossibly, inconceivably far away – before fading out.

"They both need to fall. Both. We cannot give you answers. We can barely give you help. We could force you, but it would defeat the point. Both the church and the investors. But we gave you a deal. Now you have to help us make someone else do it."

And then, heavy as a blow to the head, the knowledge that you're awake and ready to decide for yourself.